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THE ROYAL COMMISSION ON VIOLENCE IN
THE COMMUNICATIONS INDUSTRY

INTERIM REPORT

JANUARY 1976



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in the Communications Industry,
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THE ROYAL COMMISSION ON VIOLENCE
IN THE COMMUNICATIONS INDUSTRY

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His Honour Judge Lucien Beaulieu
Commissioner

Scott Young, Commissioner

* * *

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TERMS OF REFERENCE

Copy of an Order-in-Council approved by Her Honour the Lieutenant-Governor, dated the 7th day of May, A.D. 1975.

Upon the recommendation of the Honourable the Premier, the Committee in Council advise that pursuant to the provisions of The Public Inquiries Act, 1971, S.O. 1971, Chapter 49, a Commission be issued appointing

The Honourable Julia Verlyn LaMarsh, P.C., Q.C., LL. D.,
Judge Lucien Arthur Beaulieu, and
Scott Alexander Young,

and naming the said Julia Verlyn LaMarsh as Chairman thereof, to study the possible harm to the public interest of the increasing exploitation of violence in the communications industry; and that the Commission be empowered and instructed:

- 1) to study the effects on society of the increasing exhibition of violence in the communications industry;
- 2) to determine if there is any connection or a cause and effect relationship between this phenomenon and the incidence of violent crime in society;
- 3) to hold public hearings to enable groups and organizations, individual citizens and representatives of the industry to make known their views on the subject;
- 4) to make appropriate recommendations, if warranted, on any measures that should be taken by the Government of Ontario, by other levels of Government, by the general public and by the industry.

The Committee further advise that pursuant to the said Public Inquiries Act, the said Commissioners shall have the power of summoning any person and requiring such person to give evidence on oath and to produce such documents and things as the Commissioners deem requisite for the full investigation of the matters to be examined.

And the Committee further advise that all Government ministries, boards, agencies and committees shall assist, to the fullest extent, the said Commissioners who, in order to carry out their duties and functions, shall have the power and authority to engage such staff, secretarial and otherwise, and technical advisers as they deem proper, at rates of remuneration and reimbursement to be approved by the Management Board of Cabinet.

DEFINITION OF VIOLENCE

The Nature of Violence

Violence is action which intrudes painfully or harmfully into the physical, psychological or social well-being of persons or groups.

Violence or its effect may range from trivial to catastrophic.

Violence may be obvious or subtle.

It may arise naturally or by human design.

Violence may take place against persons or against property.

It may be justified or unjustified, or justified by some standards and not by others.

It may be real or symbolic.

Violence may be sudden or gradual.

The Nature of Media Violence

Violence depicted in film, television, sound, print or live performance, is not necessarily the same as violence in real life.

Things not violent in reality may be violent in their portrayal.

Violence presented in the media may reach large numbers of people, whereas real violence may not.

The media may use many artificial devices to lessen or to amplify its emotional and social effects.

Violence depicted may do harm the original violence may not have done – or it may have no impact at all.

INTERIM REPORT
OF THE
COMMISSIONERS

The task given to the Royal Commission on Violence in the Communications Industry was spelled out by the Order-In-Council which set up the Commission last May 7. We were to study the possible harm to the public interest of the "increasing exploitation of violence in the communications industry" — specifically, the obviously expanding use of graphic and detailed scenes of violence in entertainment television and films; the more long-standing and traditional depiction of violence in newspapers, magazines and books, and on radio and television news broadcasts; and to a much lesser extent (in terms of total impact on society) the incidence and effects on society of violence in live theatre, comic books and rock music in concerts and records.

The inherent question was: Did extensive, frequent depiction of violent acts in any or all of these media harm society in many ways, including by helping to fuel the rising incidence of crime in real life?

In seeking answers, we were asked to study all available research on the subject wherever it had been undertaken. Also, we were to hold public hearings throughout Ontario to record the views of private citizens and citizen-groups on one hand, and members of the communications industry on the other. Then we were to report what we found and to recommend what changes, if any, we felt should be undertaken in the public interest by the communications industry, the public, or by the various levels of government concerned. We intend to make our final report on or before the end of 1976, but feel that some interim observations are in order before our public hearings move into their next stage.

There is a lot of work, but no great difficulty, in attacking the general ramifications of the subject. More than 2,000 publications exist on the general theme of media depiction of violence. These range from multi-volume reports of multi-million-dollar investigations, to learned papers on the results of carefully controlled laboratory research using children and young adults as subjects. These reports were identified and culled for evidence that seemed relevant to the Canadian situation. A preliminary selection of about 50 publications became, in effect, a study course for the commissioners to make us aware of what conclusions had been reached so far by the most respected behavioural scientists. There was no escaping their general conclusions: that in the U.S. and Canada the depiction of violence, especially in television programming and films, is extremely high. The nearly unanimous verdict of all major studies was that the controlled showing of depictions of violence produced heightened aggressiveness in groups tested, when compared to the behaviour of control groups that had seen non-violent material, or none at all.

Such laboratory testing, however, identifies only one among a constellation of effects on human beings; and simple aggressiveness in itself does not necessarily mean violent behaviour. At the upper end of the scale the facts are much more drastic: a thick file of apparently direct cause and effect relationships. A few samples:

- A televised mock suicide caused a Calgary youth to try the same technique, and hang himself. Another had the same result near Cornwall.
- A fictional scene of dousing a skid-row derelict with gasoline and setting him on fire was followed by a rash of such crimes on real city streets.
- A film director reported using a subway-suicide scene in a British television film. To do so, he ignored the objections of transit authorities that such a scene would be followed instantly

by a wave of subway suicides. By noon on the day following the program, several suicides had taken place and he said he will not forget the lesson.

- An aircraft-bomb extortion plot in a U.S. television film, was followed in the United States by several attempts at the same thing. When the film was shown a year later on Australian TV, the same result occurred immediately.

In Canada, some believe that newspaper reports of a shooting in Brampton Centennial High School helped to provide the impetus for a similar crime in Ottawa – which also had overtones of resemblance to a murder described in a novel called *The Collector*, also made into a film. The Ottawa youth also had a substantial collection of pornographic magazines about violence against women.

In all these and other fatal cases, however, the counter-argument should be acknowledged: that some individuals are like ticking bombs, ready to respond to any detonator, not necessarily one emanating from the media.

Nevertheless, anyone studying the mass of similar material – ranging in scale from the relatively harmless, to the likely fatal – must in logic conclude that if some people are relatively unaffected by depictions of violence, and some are profoundly affected, those who live between the two poles are affected to a greater or lesser extent, or in varying ways. Here, the consensus of research is that a steady diet of news and entertainment violence may produce desensitization even in the fairly well-balanced individual to a point where hurtful or violent acts against others become unconsciously accepted as normal behaviour; and that entertainment television's traditional use of the violent solution for most human problems sets up a value system that is drastically at variance with the ethical base of Canadian family life, where peaceful solutions, reached with due respect to individual rights, are recognized as the most desirable ends to any conflict.

The commissioners thus reached two preliminary conclusions before public hearings began: first, that there is an extremely high level of violence in the media; and second, that this violence may cause damage in a society in many ways, to a greater or lesser degree, from pushing in schoolyards to copying murder techniques. Having arrived at these conclusions, we face the most difficult consideration: what, if anything, to do about it?

The answers to that question apparently seem plain and straightforward to the great preponderance of people who have appeared at the Commission's public hearings, or have written or phoned the Commission to express their opinions. They simply demand, in unequivocal terms, that the communications industry clean up its act.

Their solutions are not always easily attainable (one man suggested that in such matters as political assassinations, the death should be reported but not the detailed circumstances or even the weapon) but they rarely lack clarity. Several strongly-worded suggestions were made that all U.S.-made television should be banned in Canada. A Grade 13 class in Cornwall contended in its brief that there should be no violence on television from 4:00 p.m. to 10:00 p.m. while children might be watching and that offenders should be fined heavily, or lose their broadcast licenses. There were reports of schoolyard brutality (a girl kneed another in the face, a technique learned from wrestling on television) and hockey brutality (learned from televised hockey). In one area, speakers contended that newspaper articles

about a wave of suicides caused more persons to consider, and attempt, suicide. Teachers expressed deep concern about recurrent incidents of guns and other weapons being brought into high schools.

Most of these objections were to television programming, and most of the complaints come from people who are intelligent and concerned — parents, businessmen, doctors, teachers, clergymen, a hydro worker in Cornwall, an appealing and eloquent 18-year-old high school girl from South River. This wave of criticism for television should be worth more consideration than the usual few glib self-serving remarks from TV and radio commentators; a point which we hope more senior broadcast industry owners and managers will take into account.

Why do so many see television as Media Enemy No. 1? The answer seems locked somewhere in its all-pervasiveness as the family entertainment medium — but a medium which also carries the frustrating feeling for the viewer that no single individual, person, voice, face, or agency is responsible for it; that it makes no provision for feedback. "If you don't like your 10-year-old daughter to be watching a rape scene in a movie commercial on television at the dinner hour, who do you call?" one parent asked. He had tried calling the switchboard at the TV station, where none of the senior executives were available or ever called back. The same experience was reported in many Ontario hearings. This lack of proprietor responsiveness in TV leads people to feel that their most passionate objections disappear into a limbo from which no rejoinder, response, or explanation ever comes. In contrast, the local newspaper has an editor, or a letters page where corrections, rebuttals, or plain bile, may be aired. The local paperback rack belongs to a person who responds if enough people say, "Either clean it up or we won't buy anything in your store again." People choose books and pay for them; choose films, live theatre performances, records, concerts, or magazines, and pay for them. In those parts of the media, whatever they see or read is a matter of free choice among a multitude of alternatives.

It probably follows naturally that criticism of TV programming is greatest where alternatives are least available. Two stations in one two-network city both run films, often violent, at the dinner hour. You either watch one, or turn off the set. Other complaints included: playing good family-style documentaries late at night instead of during family viewing hours; dropping commercials for restricted movies into cartoon programs being watched by kids who can't legally see the movie, but get the juiciest parts through the commercial; beer commercials equating alcohol with fun, in a community where a wave of suicides among young people had been linked in most cases to alcohol. "My objection to beer commercials," said the coroner with more than two decades of experience in that area, "is that they don't show all the possible results of drinking beer. Why not one showing the usual happy party ending in a car smash with bodies hanging out of the windows?" He contended that beer advertising should be banned from television, for dangers he felt were at least as real as, and more spectacular than, those for which cigarette advertising is banned.

While many would prefer solutions short of censorship, now applied only to films in Ontario, others in considerable numbers say they would have no objection to censorship to help them control what comes into their homes. Some argue that other parts of society operate under forms of censorship now — minimum ages for driving and drinking, for instance — where rules are enforced for the protection of society and its individuals. Many feel that if morals or sensibilities or perceptions of human behaviour are endangered by violence in the media, the danger should be removed.

Some of those who opposed outright censorship argued for, and in some cases pleaded for, a method of coding or classifying TV programs for violent content, these classifications to be published in newspaper program listings as a guide to parents who wish to exercise some control over family viewing habits. (For instance, a circled 4-V symbol might mean that a program is ultra-violent; 3-V less so; and so on). In some hearing areas, television stations already make such information available as parental warnings — but this is effective only if the parent happens to be watching when the program begins.

One of the most common suggestions was for a long period of family programming beginning when school was out, around 4:00 p.m., and continuing to 9:00 or 10:00 p.m. There was also annoyance and disappointment in many areas where channels are limited, at the Ontario government's decision to slow down expansion of its educational network, TVO, originally designed to cover all Ontario. The expansion phase that was halted by governmental financial cutbacks was in precisely those areas of Ontario, including the north, where the TV choice is most limited. In such areas if two commercial networks (one the CBC) have violent programs running head to head, you either watch one, or turn off the set because there is no alternative. Many citizens feel that TVO, when it comes (it is now seen only in Ottawa, Toronto, Kitchener and London areas), bears the inherent promise of a programming philosophy they can live with.

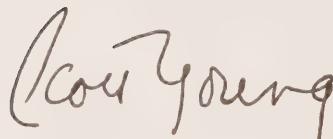
In the dialogues between the Commission and the audience that occur spontaneously after the presentation of formal briefs at public hearings, the concerns that emerge are unstructured, from the heart, and very real. We've heard nothing that should make people of the communications industries, especially television and to a lesser extent newspaper publishing, sleep easily. In the next few months at our hearings in large cities where communications industry executives will be heard, we hope for illumination of the industry's policies, methods, reasons and thought processes with regard to the depiction of violence; what they think of possible alternatives; and what they feel to be their responsibilities.



JUDY LAMARSH,
CHAIRMAN



LUCIEN A. BEAULIEU,
COMMISSIONER



SCOTT YOUNG,
COMMISSIONER

INTERIM REPORT
OF THE
DIRECTOR OF PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

Everybody is an expert on the media: two-year olds can lisp the jingles they hear on television; teeny-boppers pour their allowances into the 2½ billion dollar rock and roll industry; daily newspapers are received in 75% of Canadian homes and more and more people are watching movies, either at home or in theatres.

People feel strongly about the things they “know” – that’s why the opinions, experiences, concerns of Ontario’s citizens are vital to the Royal Commission on Violence in the Communications Industry.

One of the prime aims of the Commission is to make itself open to the public in a way that’s been attempted by few Royal Commissions. Every decision touching on public participation – from the choice of hearing sites to the design of ads – was reached with accessibility and sensitivity to community concerns as goals.

Our first job was to choose sites for public hearings; media maps were made pin-pointing radio and television reception in every Ontario community, the location of every movie theatre, drive-in and daily newspaper in the province.

Those gave us some idea of what media were available to which communities – information that was, however, only one of several considerations in choosing hearing sites. After all, we reasoned, a community might have no daily newspapers, no theatres or drive-ins, no television station of its own and receive relatively few TV signals from elsewhere and still be urgently concerned about media violence. (Manitoulin Island, for example.)

We also wanted to go to isolated communities that lacked media, to find out whether people missed them – if so why and if not why not; we wanted to go to places not normally visited by Royal Commissions because we felt that such cities and towns would be especially interested in the opportunity to be heard. We wanted our hearings to reflect Ontario’s mixture of community sizes, attitudes, language and cultural groups, as well as genuinely representing its diverse geography.

At the beginning we thought that 15 or so hearings would enable us to meet a reasonable number of people using the guidelines we’d set for ourselves, but it quickly became apparent that that was an insufficient number and, in the end, we chose 37 different communities in which to hold more than 40 hearings.

We chose relatively remote sites – places like Moosonee/Moose Factory, Sioux Lookout; we chose sites not normally visited because they’re a little harder to reach – places like Bancroft and Kenora; we chose places that seldom attract Royal Commissions – places like Cornwall and Wingham.

And of course we chose the large centres where industry, academia, large populations and large numbers of media are clustered: Toronto, Ottawa, Hamilton.

We worked from the belief that Ontario’s North, where people often feel unconnected to the rest of the province, could make a singular contribution to discussions of the effect of the media (or its lack of effect) in an isolated society.

We also worked from the belief that, in accordance with Ontario's role as a leader in Confederation, our Commission should be available in both official languages. We broke new ground to become Ontario's first bilingual Commission: 9 of our hearings, all in cities and towns with substantial numbers of Francophones, have simultaneous translation available. Our efforts to approach Ontario's citizens in either language are substantially helped by the presence of a bilingual Commissioner, His Honour, Judge Lucien Beaulieu, as well as by our bilingual Executive Assistant.

Acting on our interest in native culture, we have offered interpretation services, in Cree and/or Ojibwe, where there is an indication that several briefs and/or oral presentations will be made in those languages.

We then discussed how we could attract a genuinely "public" audience — the concerned parent, the informed youngster in school, the sensitive clergyman — as well as industry spokesmen.

Because we were appointed on a part-time basis, it was clear the hearings would take place only once or twice a week; in order to make it possible for working men and women to attend, we decided that with few exceptions, hearings would be on Friday nights and, if the number of briefs warranted it, on Saturday mornings. (This is not the case in the North, where, because of the distances involved in travelling, 12 centres will be covered in two one-week swings, the first, in January, to the Northeast and the second, in March, to the Northwest.)

The decisions to have hearings in many centres, to offer translation services where appropriate, to hold most hearings on weekends — all were predicated on small meetings in which people would feel at ease, would speak freely and would understand the importance of the Commission's task and their role in it.

To cement that sense of intimacy and accessibility, advance staff visited most of the centres to which we were going and, in looking for locations, sought, wherever possible, the place which was reasonably convenient, comfortable, small in size and "well-liked in the community" — that is, a place people customarily visited. Wherever possible, we looked for those places which could be reached easily by the elderly and the handicapped. (That we were not always successful is a comment on the still-evident lack of facilities in our society for those groups.)

While we worked to shape our meetings, we were also making preparations for their content. Some people want the Commission to listen to their reactions, while others want to make presentations based on more than their own feelings and experiences.

The first group has an opportunity to react at any time of the day or night by using our Ontario-wide toll-free 24-hour Wide Area Telephone Service: 1-800-261-7091.

We'll discuss the WATS line in another context, but it is worth mentioning that to date, it has a small but steady number of callers who use it, as we hoped it would be used, to react quickly to a media event, short-circuiting the frequent frustration of "wanting to tell somebody and not knowing who's responsible".

Some people use this same approach at the hearings themselves; one of the most moving "briefs" came in our first meeting (Cornwall) when a man came to the microphone and, his voice uneven with the

force of his feeling, pleaded for our support in his efforts to be a responsible parent in controlling his children's access to the media.

For those who wished more information before making submissions, and to inform the general public of our mandate, our work and our hearing plans, we produced 40,000 English and 4,000 French brochures and return cards. Up to the beginning of the mail strike, some 20,000 brochures had been sent, with a return card response of seven percent (about twice the expected return for direct mailing).

To date, another 8,000 brochures have been distributed at hearings, speaking engagements and in response to requests on earlier return cards.

In order to provide a reference source for those who want to read up on media violence and how it relates to social violence, the brochure lists 15 books and periodicals suggested as a basic reading list by the Commission's research team.

But a reading list of publications that are difficult to obtain in smaller libraries is of limited use, so the Library Project was undertaken: a poster (simply a blowup of the brochure's cover) and brochures (in the appropriate language) were sent to the 1,239 school and community libraries in Ontario. A letter, suggesting that the poster and brochures might make a suitable display, especially in conjunction with some of the listed publications, was enclosed.

There is no way of ascertaining whether this was the actual use made of the material, but indications of success include requests for the posters from other institutions (schools, businesses, etc.) and letters from people who picked up brochures from local libraries.

Were there other ways to help the public focus on the problem of media violence? – particularly when the Commission's mandate covered more than television (which many members of the public – and some of the media – seemed to believe was our sole concern).

We talked first about a film which would simply be made up of examples of visual violence stitched together to give people a sample of what was available. We rejected that idea on two grounds: it would exploit media violence (hardly fitting for our Commission) and it would appear to reach conclusions when the Commissioners both had – and wanted to make clear that they had – open minds on the subject.

We then set the following specifications for a film which might be made for us: it could not exploit violence; it had to give fair representation to varying attitudes toward violence in the media; it had to cover the full spectrum of the media; it had to focus on the issues and not on the Commission. Most important, the film, which would be shown at all hearings, had to stimulate thought and discussion on the issues.

Three film companies were approached and, in August, two young Canadian filmmakers, John Watson and Pen Densham (Insight Productions, Toronto), were given the assignment of producing a film of the type outlined.

Watson and Densham are perhaps best known for a film, *Life Times Nine*, which they made in cooperation with a group of school children and which, in 1974 won an Academy Award nomination.

The film they made for us, *Reflections On Violence*, has exceeded our most enthusiastic hopes for it and, in addition to its scheduled showings at hearings, has been so popular that nineteen more copies have been made and are circulating throughout the province, in response to requests from clubs, religious organizations and high schools.

(Within two months after we accepted the final print of *Reflections on Violence*, nearly 50,000 people had seen the film, at hearings, in schools, clubs and on cable television.)

Reflections on Violence is available with a French sound track at hearings; three copies of a shortened version (for use in younger classes and with other groups) are also available.

In July an ad was placed in each of Ontario's 44 dailies and its 408 weekly, ethnic and religious publications, setting out our terms of reference, inviting briefs and announcing the existence and number of our **WATS** phone line. (In order to reach all the papers, the ad was translated into twenty-three different languages.)

In addition, we placed these ads in the Ontario editions of November's *Chatelaine* and the *Maclean's* of October 6, (the first in the magazine's new format, which had Ontario circulation of 340,000 copies). A similar ad appeared in all copies of *Saturday Night*, which does not have a separate Ontario edition.

In September a second ad appeared in all of Ontario's dailies and weeklies, announcing the dates and locations of hearings.

A further ad has been produced: a reminder, one week before the event, that we are holding hearings in a given area. A program of 30-second radio ads was undertaken, these to run the week before the hearing, to remind people, even those who did not wish to make presentations, of the importance of attending hearings and listening to the views of others.

It is a statement of the obvious to say that a Royal Commission which makes accessibility a central characteristic depends on the mail. It's not just a matter of being able to send out brochures and receive return cards, however.

If we are to have an opportunity to read briefs so that we can consider them in advance of speaking to their authors at the hearings; if we are to offer copies of briefs to the news media; if we are to answer the dozens of daily questions, requests for information and for assistance in planning briefs — the mail is essential.

One week before our first hearing, the mail strike began and, having planned for that eventuality, we placed an ad in each Ontario daily and weekly newspaper. The ad emphasized the existence of the **WATS** line and explained our plans for keeping a small but vital flow of communications open through bus parcel express and a courier service.

Since then, the WATS line has been a useful link between the Commission and the people of Ontario. Our WATS recording equipment used to yield a few calls each morning; since then, the number of calls has been roughly 10 times what it was before the ad.

A similar, though less dramatic, increase in the number of calls has occurred during the day, a percentage of it from individuals, groups, schools, newspapers and broadcasting stations who, in normal circumstances, contact us by mail.

Though we were able to continue our hearings during the strike, and in fact held seven hearings while it was on, we had to interrupt our request for notices of intention to submit briefs or advance copies of briefs. We have, of course, no way of telling whether those seven hearings, or others in the future, have been affected by the strike, but there is no doubt that the meetings to date have been, in the context we established, "successful".

We said in early June that we wanted the people of Ontario to talk to us in hearings made up of intensely interested people who, having thought about the problem of violence in the media and in society, would come forward to share their concerns with us.

Though each hearing has had its own distinct character, certain patterns have emerged: people are concerned about the exploitation of violence in the communications industry and are urging us to recommend some restrictions to the various levels of Government. Though they deplore censorship, they do ask for some limits, especially on televised violence. (We may, of course, hear just as emphatically the other points of view when we have our Toronto and Ottawa hearings where the preponderance of groups in the communications industry will be heard.)

It is worth noting that restrictions (non-violent viewing hours; violence rating systems, etc.) come most emphatically from high school students.

Aside from television, newspapers are the medium most criticized by our audiences. The most persistent complaint is that their stories on violent acts include information which it is not useful for the community to have and which only panders to an appetite for violence. They often mention in this connection the shooting incidents in Brampton and in Ottawa; they make similar, though less frequently-heard complaints, about news magazines, especially in relation to the assassination attempts on the life of U.S. President Gerald Ford.

Another complaint of our audiences is that they find it difficult to make contact with people responsible for media violence, especially televised violence. However, several people commented that, when they complained about the display of violent and/or pornographic printed material at local drug stores or variety stores, the owners/managers were very sensitive to their concerns and the offending material was removed.

At several of the hearings we heard of bizarre incidents which mimicked public events: a priest in Cornwall told us of a tragic incident in which a neighbour's young child hanged himself after watching a hanging on a Walt Disney movie being shown on television; perhaps the most common – almost universal – incidents of mimicking took place after the Evel Knievel motorcycle jump.

INTERIM REPORT
OF THE
DIRECTOR OF RESEARCH

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INTRODUCTION

The scope of the Commission's research program is defined by the terms of reference:

to study the possible harm to the public interest of the increasing exploitation of violence in the communications industry; and . . .

1. to study the effects on society of the increasing exhibition of violence in the communications industry;
2. to determine if there is any connection or a cause and effect relationship between this phenomenon and the incidence of violent crime in society;
3. to hold public hearings to enable groups and organizations, individual citizens and representatives of the industry to make known their views on the subject;
4. to make appropriate recommendations, if warranted, on any measures that should be taken by the Government of Ontario, by other levels of government, by the general public and by the industry.

The Commission's research program must be responsive both to the substantive provisions of these terms of reference and to issues raised in public hearings.

The research challenge based on these terms of reference involves:

- analysis of communications content, conventions and techniques;
- physiological and medical aspects — how media violence affects our brains and our bodies;
- psychological impacts, including perceptions, learning, conditioning and subliminal effects;
- sociological aspects — the broad scale effects of media violence on society and social behaviour;
- the economics of media violence;
- political science aspects, especially media violence as a form of political expression and a means to political change;
- legal, constitutional and policy aspects of media violence.

To find answers to the research questions posed by its terms of reference, the Commission is seeking the best available expertise, as well as attempting to chart new ground in the systematic analysis of media violence and its effects.

The following chapters pose and answer five questions about the nature and effects of media violence and the research issues which must be confronted.

Chapter 1 poses the question, "How important is violence in the media?" and outlines why the media presentation of violence may be one of the most important social issues today.

Chapter 2 asks, "How much do we already know about the effects of media violence?" and documents the few questions which are already answered and the many which are not.

Chapter 3 queries, “Why is there so much media violence, and what does that tell us about the media industries?”, discussing the audience and media industry aspects which may be behind the presentation of violence.

Chapter 4 responds to the question, “Are Canadian society and cultural identity being threatened by media violence imported from the U.S. and other countries?”, with particular reference to whether we are importing an epidemic of social violence from the United States.

Chapter 5 presents a sample list of policy options in response to the questions, “Can anything be done about media violence?” and “What can Ontario do?”

A concluding section identifies 9 major respects in which the Royal Commission enquiry will be different from others which have gone before.

1. HOW IMPORTANT IS VIOLENCE IN THE COMMUNICATIONS MEDIA?

Importance of the Media Industries

Present-day media industries are enormously important. They include television, film, radio, news-papers, magazines, books, comics, records, rock concerts and live theatre. The media pervade our daily lives, and there are few Canadians who are not deluged every day with the output of several media. Consider these facts:

- In Canada, more than 96% of the population have television in their homes,¹ and spend an average of 13 hours a week watching television.²
- 75% of Canadian homes (84% in Ontario) receive at least 1 newspaper daily.³
- In 1974 Canadians spent nearly \$84 million on records.⁴
- More than 24 million comic books are sold in Canada each year.⁵
- In 1975 Canadians will spend \$200 million at the movie box-office.⁶
- There are more than 15 million radios in Canada,⁷ and 86% of Canadians log 3.4 hours or more of radio listening each day.⁸

Each of the media industries has its own particular language, audience, methods of production, economics and distribution systems. The influence that all these media exert, alone and in combined effect, is enormous. They may present a radically new image of "reality".⁹ At a time when there is a notable decline in the apparent authority and influence of other formerly powerful institutions – the church, school and the family – the media have moved in to fill the vacuum left by the declining influence of these institutions.¹⁰ Some might say that the media have contributed to weakening the influence of traditional institutions, but even without going that far, it remains obvious that the media are playing an enormously important role in shaping the values, attitudes, behaviour and lifestyles of contemporary society.

With the increasing anonymity of urban life,¹¹ many people may learn about the world largely through the media. They are pounded with facts, emotions and concerns that go far beyond the scope of experience of previous decades. Through the media they may be as constantly involved in the floods and famines, riots and revolutions in far-off places as with the social forces in their own society.

Sometimes they know more about peoples on the far side of the globe than about their high-rise neighbours. The media give people contact with things far beyond their "environment" as understood by earlier generations. They create a new environment, perhaps distorting the one that is real.

Television in particular has had a gigantic impact. Indeed, individuals and families have totally restructured their lifestyles with the advent of television. For example, a study shows that 60% of U.S. families changed their sleeping patterns, and 55% have moved meal times because of television. There has been a reduction in the amount of time spent on other activities such as sleep, social gatherings outside of the home, other leisure activities and household chores.¹²

The Impact of Violence in the Media

Not everyone sees violence in the same way. What is violent to one person, might not be considered so by another. Violence can be as much psychological and social as physical. The Commission has adopted the following working definition of violence:

Violence is action which intrudes painfully or harmfully into the physical, psychological or social well-being of persons or groups.

Violence or its effect may range from trivial to catastrophic.

Violence may be obvious or subtle.

It may arise naturally or by human design.

Violence may take place against persons or against property.

It may be justified or unjustified, or justified by some standards and not by others.

It may be real or symbolic.

Violence may be sudden or gradual.

Violence depicted in film, television, sound, print or live performance, is not necessarily the same as violence in real life.

Things not violent in reality may be violent in their portrayal.

Violence presented in the media may reach large numbers of people, whereas real violence may not.

The media may use many artificial devices to lessen or to amplify its emotional and social effects.

Violence depicted may do harm the original may not have done — or it may have no impact at all.

Media violence may be entirely fictional, or it may be both cause and a symptom of the violence in society, whether psychological, social or physical. No single cause can be found for violence in society, but it is certain that the media may be involved in many ways — as a direct influence, or in spreading the impact of other influences, or of violence itself.

There are three ways the media may be involved in the spread of social violence. They may contribute to a climate conducive to violence. They may be a causal influence in specific acts of violence. Or they may exaggerate or aggravate the effects through mass dissemination.

A climate of violence may be shaped in many ways. Non-violent content may create intensely unrealistic expectations or attitudes which tend to find an outlet in violence. This is thought to be true of some kinds of materialistic aspirations, both for individuals and society. Adolescent car theft may be associated with the media-promoted significance of the automobile as economic and social symbol.¹³ Studies in the United States and elsewhere point to the role of economic expectations in many forms of social violence.¹⁴

Violent content is considerably emphasized in various media, especially television. It is estimated that as much as 80% of U.S. prime time programming contains violent incidents.¹⁵ Another study showed that in a reasonably typical 2-week period nearly 64% of news on an American network was devoted to violence, protest and war.¹⁶

Both the emphasis on violence and the manner of presentation may contribute to violence in society in several ways. The media may create expectations of violence, which are then sensationalized and catered to in news reports and entertainment. This has been documented in several studies.¹⁷ The

media may encourage perceptions of recurrent violence as the social norm — inevitable, expected or even necessary.¹⁸ Media violence may lead to fear and defensive attitudes on a widespread basis, such as with respect to urban violence. The hostile, deserted city core may be a media-induced fear phenomenon — a self-fulfilling fear.¹⁹

Media violence may be identified as a potentially causal influence in social violence in several ways.

First, media presentations may actually teach techniques of crime and violence. There are a number of instances where the media have provided blueprints for hijacking, extortion, rape, murder, suicide and personal injury which are later copied in real life.²⁰ Criminals may learn about new weapons or police tactics through the media.²¹

At a broader level, media violence may become real violence through more general mechanisms of imitation and social learning. Both children and adults are likely to behave more aggressively as a result of repeated exposure to media violence, according to numerous studies.²²

Second, violence may be encouraged if violence, conflict, confrontation and terrorism become the means to attract media attention. Terrorists have become aware of the political power they can wield over the media by committing acts of violence.²³ The media pay more attention to individuals and groups where conflict and confrontation are involved, and these may be staged to gain audiences for political and other views.²⁴

A special aspect is the glorification of individual criminals in the media. The promise of media coverage and celebrity status is thought by some informed professionals to increase the likelihood of assassinations and other crimes.²⁵

Third, the media may play a role in the victimization of particular groups, or of society at large. Media portrayals may prompt passive responses by repeatedly depicting women, the elderly or ethnic minorities as victims.²⁶ Media-induced fears of crimes of violence may be exploited for criminal purposes, victimizing society as a whole.

The effects of violence may be exaggerated or aggravated by portrayal in the mass media.

For example, it is estimated that the average American child, by the age of 15, has witnessed more than 13,000 murders on television.²⁷ Few people witness one real murder in a lifetime. Such vast amounts of media violence can lead to fear, anxiety and apprehension, perhaps on a mass basis. Such widespread concern could not take place without mass communications media.

Alternatively, repeated exposure to media violence may have a different consequence — desensitization. It has been demonstrated that as a result of frequent exposure to violence in television, films, newspapers, magazines and other media, people may lose their sensitivity to violence, emotionally, psychologically and physiologically.²⁸ Desensitization may lead to increased tolerance of violence or decreased felt responsibility for the consequences of violence when it is encountered in real life. It is also possible that desensitization to the consequences of violence may weaken inhibitions against committing acts of violence.²⁹

Finally, the media may aggravate social problems by presenting us with a distorted picture of reality – but one on which we act nevertheless. The media may in particular distort our images of the nature and incidence of violence in society, or convey a false sense of social priorities by exaggerating and sensationalizing violence, and distracting us from other priorities which should command our attention.

Summary

In all of these ways, media violence may be contributing to the spread of social violence – that is the concern. To what extent are these media mechanisms at work, contributing to a climate of violence, causally influencing the spread of real violence, and exaggerating the effects of violence?

Do media audiences want violence? Why? Have they been conditioned to want violence? What is it that attracts them? Is life itself essentially violent? And are the media merely reflecting this or simply ignoring the positive elements of humanity? Or is contemporary life so boring that people crave more excitement? These are questions the Commission's research program hopes to answer.

2. HOW MUCH DO WE ALREADY KNOW ABOUT THE EFFECTS OF MEDIA VIOLENCE?

The commonly shared feeling is that we know a great deal about the effects of media violence. It is widely believed that the large number of studies which have been done give us a fairly clear picture of the effects. The U.S. Surgeon General's report and subsequent studies seem to prove conclusively that there is a link, for example, between televised violence and aggressive behaviour. This proof is so conclusive that many American researchers are no longer working in the area of anti-social behaviour but have shifted their interests to new areas, particularly the area of pro-social behaviour.

The number and importance of the studies that have been done are, however, misleading. A close examination of the research indicates that a great deal of work has been done in a very narrow area of television violence. Meanwhile, many of the most important questions are still unanswered.

Of equal importance is the fact that there are very few studies of non-television media, and it is also recognized that even single-media studies are very incomplete. Some media phenomena may be difficult to study because audience reactions are fleeting and cannot be duplicated in the laboratory, as with rock concerts. However, studies must be done in order to give us a more complete picture of media effects.

In addition, there are very few studies of news programming and the effects of its presentation of violence. There is also a lack of studies of pro-social and neutral content. This means we lack basic information on the kinds of pro-social programming which exist and the proportions of pro-social programming compared to violent programming.

What Has and Has Not Been Done:

1. Aggression and Catharsis

There have been a number of studies of the question, "Does televised violence cause aggression?". The majority of the research to date has been done in this area.

The evidence from more than 100 studies of screen violence and aggressive behaviour considered by the Royal Commission is fairly conclusive. The presentation of media violence can lead to an increase in the level of aggression.³⁰ There are, however, differences in the levels of aggression depending upon the context within which violence is presented. For example, people react less aggressively where the programming has a happy ending.³¹ They react more aggressively to violence seen as justified.³² Different individuals may have different reactions to the same media violence.³³

Aggression studies, such as those in the U.S. Surgeon General's report, indicate that the amount of exposure to media violence is related to levels of post-viewing aggression.³⁴ This is especially important with respect to children's programming because television cartoons are often the most physically violent form of media content.³⁵ There may be as many as 23 violent episodes in every hour of cartoons.³⁶

Countering the studies of aggression are a number of studies of what is known as the "catharsis theory". This states the belief that individuals can work out their aggressive tendencies vicariously by watching media violence. In this way, media violence may have a positive effect in reducing aggression.³⁷

The majority of studies which have been done, however, indicate that the catharsis theory does not appear to be accurate. In fact, the conclusion that is drawn is that media violence raises rather than reduces the level of post-viewing aggression.³⁸

2. Content Analysis of Media Violence

A number of analyses of media content have been done, primarily of prime time entertainment programming on U.S. television.³⁹ These analyses report that the amount of violent content on television is high and by some measures increasing. One leading study documents an average of 7 to 8 incidents of physical violence per hour of television prime time. It also shows that most television violence occurs between strangers and is most frequently committed by young, white, middle class and upper class unmarried males. As much as 40% of the "population" of the world presented on television may be associated with crime and law enforcement.

Studies also show that people's attitudes and perceptions often conform to television depictions, even if they are a distorted image of reality.⁴⁰

A small amount of work has been done on other media. There is documentation of the treatment of women in film.⁴¹ Violence in children's folk tales and other forms of literature has been partially studied.⁴² Comic books and strips have in the past been studied because of their violent nature.⁴³ Newspapers compete with each other in both format and style,⁴⁴ and this can be closely related to the presentation of violence. News tends to be written and presented for its dramatic effects. However, these areas have not been completely and clearly studied and there is a lack of comparative data for different media. Most of the studies are American.

An important feature of most of the content studies which have been done is the use of a definition of violence which is restricted to physical acts of violence.⁴⁵ This means that there is an almost complete lack of data on psychological and social violence. It also means that available measures of media violence may be seriously understated.

Equally important, many existing studies lack analysis of key qualitative and contextual aspects of media violence. These include analyses of types of aggressors, types of victims and motivations for violence. Also missing is more detailed information on the quality of violence, the nature and portrayal of the consequences of violence, and the values implied by the way violence is treated. We also lack analysis of the physical settings of violence and how they may affect our perceptions of the real world.

As noted, studies are available to indicate that U.S. television violence has increased dramatically over the past 20 years, and especially during the 1960's.⁴⁶ We do not have similar data for film, newspapers, rock music or popular literature. Sports violence in the media has not been fully analysed. Even television news has been only selectively and occasionally studied.⁴⁷ Consequently, we have a very incomplete picture of violence as presented in different media and across a period of years. There is a lack of multimedia content studies, and of content data on how different media interact with and reinforce each other.

And there are very few studies of Canadian media content. Because of the prevalence of the U.S. media influence in Canada, some American content analyses are applicable in the Canadian context.

Nevertheless, good Canadian data needs to be developed. Preliminary studies of both television news and entertainment programs suggest that Canadian content may be significantly less violent than American.⁴⁸

3. Pro-Social Content

Even if a large proportion of media content features violence, it is apparent that there are popular media and content which are not violent. Furthermore, there is clear evidence that programming can be pro-social and have high audience appeal. This is reflected in the popularity of such pro-social children's programs as Sesame Street⁴⁹ and Misterogers' Neighborhood.⁵⁰ In adult programming there is also clear evidence that non-violent programming can be popular. Of the top ten CBC programs in September-October 1975 Bureau of Broadcast Measurement ratings, eight could be classified as non-violent, and of the top ten CTV programs, five could be classified as non-violent.⁵¹

We know that non-violent content can encourage positive social effects on children, such as helping,⁵² sharing,⁵³ honesty,⁵⁴ delaying gratifications⁵⁵ and lowering aggressiveness.⁵⁶ Yet we lack data of how much pro-social content there is, and how it compares with the nature and proportions of media violence. We know far too little about the effects of non-violent content on adults, or what the audience reactions might be if the proportions of pro-social and violent content in our media were reversed. Pervading all these issues is the question of whether society should be given its choice between anti-social and pro-social programming. The task which remains if we are to have a complete picture is obviously a large one.

4. Media Diet

“Media diet” refers to the kinds and amount of media and media content which people actually consume. Media diet studies have tended to concentrate on advertising and commercial aspects.⁵⁷ For television⁵⁸ and film there are fairly clear pictures of what people are exposed to and how often. Advertisers and networks know why people watch television, for how long and what their preferences are. The film industry knows how many people see theatre films, what percentage of the population goes to films and what they like to see. The record industry knows why people buy records and what kinds they buy. Publishers know a lot about who reads what newspapers, magazines and books.

However, the data collected for business purposes — and all of it is not publicly available — does not give a clear picture of how the pieces fit together, and what kinds of content are actually consumed by different groups of people. In the absence of clear profiles of media diets, it is difficult to arrive at many important conclusions.

5. Images of Reality

A number of the questions which remain unanswered fall under the general category of images of reality: the picture of our world that is presented to us through the media; the relationship of that picture to the reality of life; and how we perceive and act on the images presented in the media.

The powerful hold which the media, and especially television, can have on our perceptions has been documented in a number of studies. Television's portrayal of what were thought to be typical material surroundings in terms of home, furnishings, and fashion may have defined “middle class” aspirations

for a generation. Acculturation studies document the extent to which people respond to questionnaires with answers that could only have been learned from television.⁵⁹ Studies of news indicate that news reports succeed actual events as the "reality" which is discussed and acted on.⁶⁰

An average child spends more than 12,000 hours in school by the end of high school. In the same time period he spends even more hours in front of the television set.⁶¹ It would seem improbable that children could avoid acquiring much of their value system from their television experience.⁶² That exposure is compounded by exposure to other media such as film, popular literature, and comics. The value system learned from media may be reinforced by peer group relationships.⁶³ However, some studies have shown that media effects may override peer group pressure.⁶⁴ And yet there has been no systematic analysis of the various value systems presented or promoted by the media, or how their audiences are reacting.

Stereotyping – The most obvious mismatch with social reality is in the area of role stereotypes. Minority groups are generally under-represented as are women. On television, professional and managerial roles are over-represented. There is an under-representation of occupations with low prestige. The greatest over-representation occurs for males in protective and security services. This means that we are seeing a very biased view of reality with males and policemen among the more dominant characters.⁶⁵

This stereotyping is most evident in the portrayal of women. Studies of television show that there are generally many more male than female characters. In family programs women are sometimes depicted as silly, subservient and family-oriented.⁶⁶ The Surgeon General's report indicates that women on television generally are cast in roles with sexual, romantic or family connotations.⁶⁷ Most women fall in the young adult age category and one of their main concerns is marriage. This stereotype of women carried by the media can and does have a serious effect on women's self-image.⁶⁸ At the same time, it often combines with and reinforces the general image of North American lifestyle which the media present.

The average TV family has a certain type of car, a certain type of social stature and is surrounded by the trappings of technology. Game shows and soap operas reinforce this image, presenting us with an unrealistic appraisal of the accoutrements of North American society. This unrealistic picture adds to the frustrations of daily life for those who are unable to make their lifestyle match this image. Yet we have only an incomplete picture of how these depictions shape attitudes and behaviour.

Images of Violence – The mismatch of media reality and social reality can be associated with violence in a variety of ways. The depictions themselves may cause psychological or social harm to individuals or groups.⁶⁹ They can also lead directly to acts of physical violence. Reports of the U.S. National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence (The Eisenhower Commission) indicated that violence can occur as a result of the frustrations induced by the inability to meet rising expectations.⁷⁰ The distorted images of reality presented in the media may encourage unrealistic expectations and thus contribute directly to such frustration.

In addition, violence in media presentations looks simple, attractive and successful, and it often goes unpunished. This lack of punishment may be seen as an approval of the appropriateness of violent

behaviour. By contrast, there are very few programs which present us with good interpersonal communications and conflict resolution techniques. Tackling and resolving differences by peaceful methods is not a recommended technique, at least by implication from many media offerings. Both the lack of punishment and the lack of non-violent conflict resolution in media offerings need to be carefully documented and analyzed.

The difference between the media's depiction of reality and the real world is also clearly indicated by statistics which show that both children and adults witness many thousand more crimes on television than they will ever see in real life.⁷¹

But most acts of violence in the media are divorced from their consequences. On television, for example, people are shot or stabbed and die a clean death, no suffering, no blood and no real pain. The gun goes off, the victim clutches himself and falls down and out of the picture, never to appear again. A British study on television and the child showed that children are more terrified of knives in media presentations than they are of guns.⁷² Knives are within their daily experience and they are more aware of their effects than they are of the effects of guns and gunshot wounds. What happens then to our understanding of physical violence, and its aftermath of suffering or death?

Furthermore, in the media, the aggressors are usually strangers. In reality, most of the murders which are committed yearly in Canada are committed by people who know the victim.⁷³ Studies of television indicate that, with the exception of specific types of programming such as crime dramas, violent presentations tend to be set more often in the past and the future than the present. The prevalence of TV violence is lowest in urban settings, higher in small town or rural settings and highest in uninhabited areas.^{73a} However, these discrepancies between media reality and social reality have been insufficiently studied, particularly with regard to the total media image.

6. Victimization

An important kind of conditioning which may take place as a result of media violence is victimization. As a result of media exposure, people may be more aware of the incidence and nature of certain types of crime, such as mugging and rape. Most of the women presented in crime dramas play the role of victim, whereas the proportions of male victims are smaller.⁷⁴ Even in stress situations such as a real rape attempt, women may copy reactions they have unconsciously learned from media portrayals.⁷⁵ Alternatively, women may learn to resist more aggressively from media presentations. Women are not the only group prone to victimization. After the well-publicized incidents in New York of non-smokers and Orthodox Jews (who, for religious reasons, do not carry money on the Sabbath)⁷⁶ being murdered because they were unable to offer muggers cigarettes or money, many members of these groups may now carry money and cigarettes. This makes the work of the average, non-violent panhandler much easier.

The elderly are being taught that their chances of being threatened or accosted are high. They may also be taught that the proper response is to surrender your purse or your money rather than run the risk of injury.⁷⁷

Bank managers seem to be more and more susceptible to extortion attempts where the criminals hold their families hostage. In recent months, several of these attempts have succeeded without making

hostages of the family because the bank managers are more aware of the prevalence of this type of extortion.

The victimization can, in turn, be exploited by those who sell special devices which give off warning noises when a person is being mugged. Similarly, a booming business at the moment is the sale of smoke warning devices (many of them ineffective) to those who have become fearful through media reports of fires in the home.

Notwithstanding these concerns there have been very few studies of media conditioning and victimization.

7. Conflict and Confrontation

Conflict and violence traditionally attract more media attention than "news" of any other kind. Those who wish to carry a message to the public have quickly learned how to create newsworthy events ranging from peaceful demonstrations to acts of terrorism. Particular types of events are staged for maximum media exposure.

There are numerous examples of violence, conflict and confrontation displayed by an apparently increasing number of groups in society as a device to gain media attention.⁷⁸ There is the suspicion that this pattern of interaction between media and society may be helping to spread conflict and confrontation. But we don't know for sure because it hasn't been systematically studied.

8. Tolerance

Perhaps the most important set of unanswered questions relate to the impact of media in conditioning society to violence. The major area of concern is that excessive exposure to violence in the media destroys our natural aversion and sensitivity to violence. We are also being trained to expect and to tolerate violence in society as inevitable, normal or even appropriate. If violence is widely tolerated, society as a whole may become less and less responsive to the spread of violence and related social ills.

Several studies show that repeated exposure to film and TV violence progressively reduces viewers' emotional and physiological responsiveness to violence.⁷⁹ A related problem is the concern that news and entertainment media may have fostered a reluctance on the part of the average citizen to help persons in trouble or to help the police with regard to crimes of violence which they witness. The widely publicized killing of Kitty Genovese⁸⁰ in Brooklyn in the presence of 38 on-lookers, none of whom called the police, serves as a stark example of the possible effects this tolerance may have. And yet, in spite of startling and well-known examples, very little work has been done in this area.

9. Emulation of Media Events

There seems to be a rapidly expanding dossier of crimes which have been copied from media presentations. In California, a 71-year-old man tried to rob a bank with a toy gun because he had seen it done on TV and it looked so easy. In Alberta, a youth hanged himself trying to copy a mock hanging performed by rock star Alice Cooper in his television act. Television dramas describing extortion attempts based on planting a pressure-sensitive bomb on an airplane led to an outbreak of real extortion attempts based on this threat. Public transit systems are reluctant to release statistics on subway suicides because they believe this will induce more people to try this form of self-destruction. After

the media coverage of Evel Knievel's various jumps, a rash of injuries resulted from children's attempts to copy his actions. But despite the dramatic nature of these incidents, they have yet to be systematically studied as a media phenomenon, or from a policy-oriented standpoint.

Even if many of us would never resort to violent means to resolve our problems, the potential for violence still exists. If we are placed in a position of great stress we go to our learned response, even if we know that response to be irrational. Nicholas Johnson, a former member of the U.S. Federal Communications Commission, tells of a group of National Aeronautics and Space Administration scientists who were asked to give their immediate response to the question, "What is the moon made of?". Their answer was "green cheese".⁸¹ This is an irrational response which they learned in childhood. We need to know if we're learning similar responses of this kind from violence in the media—but we do not.

10. Learning Criminal Technique

There is the suggestion that television, film and other media teach people a great deal about how to commit crimes. Obviously, some criminals are getting their ideas and even learning their techniques from media offerings. They may learn how to make or how to use new weapons. They may learn about methods which work and ones which don't. They may learn about police methods or about what they can and can't get away with.

The media may also present information which is of interest to the public in general but which may be exploited by criminals. The planned route of motorcades and the names of lottery winners are examples of this type of information. Again, these are areas that have not been thoroughly examined in published studies.

11. Glorification and Celebrity Status as a Media Reward

Another aspect of the media which may appeal to criminals is the glory that comes from having your picture on the cover. Lynette Fromme became an overnight celebrity by pointing a gun at President Ford.⁸² Her picture was on the cover of **Time**, **Newsweek** and most of the major daily newspapers in North America. This enabled her to carry her message about Charles Manson to a public who would otherwise have ignored her. According to magazine reports, Lynette Fromme's actions enabled her to achieve a new status in the remnants of the Manson family, thus becoming a heroine to her peers. Glorification and celebrity status are intimately related concepts and media exposure can make an unknown person into an instant "star". The media coverage of Britain's "Great Train Robbery" made the robbers into cultural heroes. A film and a number of books were based on their exploits.^{82a}

However, none of these aspects have yet been systematically investigated.

12. Televised Sports

Sports presentations on television are also a tool for teaching acceptable behaviour to children. Violence in hockey is appearing in younger and younger age groups because children are being shown on TV the way pro stars play the game. Children are also being taught that "making it" in professional sport is the ultimate goal for some people and that some who have mediocre hockey skills still reach the professional ranks on their ability to beat up other players.

An Ontario Government investigation⁸³ and a small number of academic studies⁸⁴ have begun to document these concerns, but much more needs to be known about the impact of televised sports.

13. Physiological Conditioning

We also respond physiologically to media presentations. Watching colour television seems to lower communication between the two halves of the brain, thereby reducing the brain's capacity to cross-check information.⁸⁵ Television may also lessen dream activity or distort the dream cycle which plays an important role in mental fitness. One study suggests viewers have more "passive" brain responses to television and more "active" responses to print.⁸⁶

We react strongly to violence because we are genetically programmed to generate emotional responses to certain types of arousal, even though our responses are partially "screened" by conscious mental processes.⁸⁷ Violence excites and captivates us, or it discomforts and revolts us, depending on which part of the nervous system responds.⁸⁸ The responses of the nervous system are also important to processes of desensitization and conditioning, discussed above in the psychological and social manifestations. Through repeated exposure to violence we may be physiologically desensitizing ourselves to real-life violence⁸⁹ or we may be conditioning ourselves to expect violence. The physiological arousal that occurs with exposure to media violence may be addictive in its own way so that we may physically need this kind of exposure.

Despite these important clues about body responses to media violence, only a very few studies have begun to explore them.

Summary

It is evident from our discussion that a great deal of work still needs to be done. The questions which remain unanswered far outweigh those which have been answered. We know that there is a relationship between television viewing and an increase in aggressive tendencies, but we can only speculate as to whether this relationship exists for other media.

We lack knowledge about a variety of topics. What is the actual media diet of the Canadian consumer? How much do we consume? To what extent are we becoming victims due to media presentations of crime? Are we more tolerant of violence in real life because of media violence? We need to do proper content analysis of Canadian content. We need to understand the images of reality presented to us through the media and how these match or mismatch Canadian social reality. We need to know the effects of media on conflict and confrontation. Finally, we need to know if there is a direct connection between media events and their emulation in real life. All of these questions still need to be properly answered.

3. WHY IS THERE SO MUCH MEDIA VIOLENCE, AND WHAT DOES THAT TELL US ABOUT THE MEDIA INDUSTRIES?

The Attraction of Violence in Entertainment

Throughout the centuries, from the catharsis of Greek tragedies, to the agony and anguish of Shakespearean dramas, to the murder and mayhem of today's mass entertainment media, one of the devices most commonly used to make a statement or to draw a crowd has been the manipulation of the audience's emotions.⁹⁰

It has been proven time and time again that two of the most successful formulas for such manipulation are sex and violence. This may be explained by the fact that they relate directly to the instinctual responses of love and fear that are crucial to the preservation of the species. Studies have shown that differences in emotional reactions to media content are very closely linked with differences in physiological as well as psychological responses.⁹¹

In any case, people are attracted to violence in the media, whether they wish to be aroused, titillated, terrified or simply because they want to see something different from the dull routine of everyday life.⁹² Some media creators may use violence for this very reason, especially in a competitive situation where it might draw larger audiences.⁹³ The public may, of course, become accustomed to one level or type of violence, and begin to find it dull and routine. The media people may then try to renew the interest of their patrons by presenting more violence, or a different type, perhaps in a different style.

The escalation and variation of violence as a theme is in many ways a phenomenon of mass communication, especially in the commercial framework we know today.⁹⁴ Sophocles and Shakespeare wrote for and under the patronage of a small educated elite, and the presentation of a play was an event in itself. Even popular ballads and story-telling in the life of the common man were regarded as special occasions, and here again there was only a small audience attending the performance of one minstrel or a small troupe.

Mass media on the other hand require much more in the way of financial support than the minstrel. They involve expenses such as printing, paper, film stock, television equipment, and distribution which must be met by reaching larger numbers of people – in addition to the creators and performers themselves.⁹⁵ These large cost sums must be met by revenues generated or the media organ will go out of business. Businesses which provide us with books, films, plays, records and some specialized magazines depend almost solely on the sale of their product for their revenue. Newspapers, radio and television organizations and most magazines, on the other hand, rely on advertising for much or all of their income. They will sell time or space to an advertiser, at a rate which is based on the size of their audience, and sometimes on the demographic characteristics it displays.⁹⁶ In the case of newspapers and magazines, newsstand and subscription earnings add to total revenues.

The competition for mass audiences and revenues can be an important influence on media content. What is produced must sell and violence is in many cases one of the proven formulas. Violent content may be an exceptional profit maker, as Jaws and other leading films illustrate.⁹⁷ Crime dramas have been one of the staples of U.S. prime time television because they are a proven method for getting

and keeping audience ratings.⁹⁸ Some newspapers appear to use violence as a competitive marketing strategy, especially when newsstand sales where the front page is on display are a major part of total circulation. Newspapers whose basic format does not exploit violence may be under competitive pressure from more violence-oriented newspapers. Both television and radio news may also exploit violence as a competitive strategy.⁹⁹ This is likely to be especially true for television since the technology tends to bias selection of news items in favour of events or phenomena which are visually exciting.¹⁰⁰ Violent content is part of the success of many books and plays, and of some popular music and sports.¹⁰¹

There are also tendencies for successful formats, such as those involving violence, to be copied or formalized. The incentive to do this may be strong, partly because variations of successful formulas are likely to attract audiences and generate revenues, and partly because they normally do not involve the financial and other risks of the original. In addition, they often do not require as much money, talent or time.¹⁰² Films such as French Connection II, Godfather II and Walking Tall Part II, illustrate the use of violence formulas, as do many police, private detective and lawyer formats on television. Similarly, the tabloid newspaper format is often associated with sensationalism and violence.

A very important implication here is that the tendency to formalize media violence may also be a tendency to proliferate it.

As mentioned earlier, financially successful formats which happen to involve violence will be copied to compete or to capitalize further on a prior success. Commercial and competitive pressures of this kind may well be behind the contemporary prevalence of violence in the communications media.

Economic Considerations and Media Content

The success of violence formats in attracting audiences and earnings also affects the internal operations of media industries. More promising formats more easily attract financing and larger budgets.¹⁰³ In this way large sums of money may be spent to create violent media presentations. In turn big budgets are often the key to a slick, highly successful product. Car and plane crashes and the artificial killer shark in Jaws are examples of expensive, but successful special effects. The \$39,500 spent for a single simulated plane crash for the television series Bronk¹⁰⁴ is a striking example of the costs which producers may be willing to incur in violence-oriented formats.

The size of budgets are an important indicator of media industry priorities. Media industries themselves may set their priorities to a large extent according to commercial considerations.¹⁰⁵ However, there is a danger that the set of social priorities which their products convey in terms of nature and proportions of violence may be harmful to both individuals and society.

Large budgets for violence formats in entertainment programming may also have counterparts in the gathering and presentation of news. Editors in television, radio and print news may specially assign reporters or provide greater resources in terms of money, travel, equipment, support or editorial attention to major news stories.¹⁰⁶ Foreign correspondents may be sent to where insurrections and war may break out. Special squads may be assigned to cover special violence categories, such as fires. Unusually large numbers of reporters may be rushed to the scene of a major disaster, and priority given

to equipment for the coverage of major news violence. Expensive international transmission of television news reports may be used more readily where violence is involved. In these ways, priority may be given to violence in the gathering and presentation of news.

Violent news may also be a greater commercial success than other kinds of news. Newspapers and newsmagazines usually print and sell more copies when assassinations, shootouts at schools and hotels, transportation disasters and bizarre crimes are headlined on the front pages. Analogous results may be indicated for broadcast news.

Violence and the Definition of News

It is likely that only a small number of news organizations and journalists actually try to produce news on the basis that it will sell. However, since the news must pay its way, the gathering and presentation of news must attract audiences and revenues. There are indications that the economics of news on both the expenditure and revenue sides may favour violent news over other kinds in many instances. This raises questions as to why it is so, and what impact these considerations have on the behaviour of news reporters and organizations.

In judgments about what is “news”, whether by reporters, editors or readers, a major consideration is what will attract readers’ interest.¹⁰⁷ Violent news attracts for the physical, emotional and psychological reasons already identified in connection with entertainment violence. The strong reader interest factor in news violence is associated with allegations that the news media often market entertainment, not information. The argument that there is news violence because it sells is meant to suggest that the commercial success of violent news is actively sought by journalists and editors.

There is little evidence that commercial considerations are a factor in the minds of most professional journalists in their gathering and presentation of the news. However, many of the conventions of news gathering and presentation reinforce or are not inconsistent with commercial considerations. For this reason they merit fuller examination, with particular reference to the presentation of violence in the news.

The standard working definitions of news – established over many decades of journalistic practice – may favour violence in several ways.¹⁰⁸ That they do is suggested by the steady diet of news violence in all the news media. The way they do it is suggested by news emphasis on “events” which are clear-cut in time, ascertainable accuracy, conflict as an attractive theme, immediacy as the dominant notion of timeliness and simplicity of the central message. Most violent news provides illustrations par excellence of these elements, while slower-moving social developments, complex phenomena and “good news” may not.

The properties of violent events which make them attractive news material may be exploited by news presentation conventions of other kinds. Two of the most important are emotive presentational styles and the use of news formulas. Reportage concerning violent events of major proportions often illustrate presentational styles which seem directed to emotional impact. The attempted assassinations of President Ford, for example, were presented in the major U.S. news weeklies much as if they had been real assassinations: massive extra space to coverage of the event, illustrated blow-by-blow accounts of

how it almost happened, instant life histories of suspects, cover pictures of the attempted assassins. A number of Toronto news media seemed to present news of a subway stabbing in a way that would elicit strong emotional identification with the circumstances of the victim. The “emotional message” seemed to be that anyone, or their sister, girl friend or daughter could have been brutally and anonymously stabbed on their way to visit grandmother in hospital on a Sunday evening. In reporting crimes, the thirst for news detail may compete with notions of good taste or need for the public to know.

There are several kinds of news formulas. One type of news formula is pattern-setting by initial reports. In some cases these may be anticipatory and may create expectations which are not met by actual events but are catered to by news reports. This phenomena has been documented in British and American studies.¹⁰⁹ In other cases, subsequent news reports may replicate the reporting angle or repeat the content of the initial report. This may preserve continuity in the mind of the reader, but may not accurately represent a developing situation.

A second kind of common news formula is recreation of an earlier story. Appeals from conviction on a bizarre crime are an opportunity to re-report highlights of the crime itself and the original trial. Anniversaries of major violent events are often marked with new reports of old news. Survivors of disasters can be the news excuse for updates which focus largely on the original violence.

A third kind of news formula – and perhaps the most important – are the formats which news organs adopt as frameworks for their news.¹¹⁰ Often there is an effort to be distinctive. In the case of newspapers, the format is reflected in layout, presentation, headlining, news location, features, and other aspects. In broadcast news, order, emphasis, writing, delivery style, and back-up reports are important. What is not featured or reported may also give clues to the news format of a particular newspaper or broadcast station.

What is important about these formats is that they can have a heavy editorial impact in structuring the news. This is partly – but only partly – because a particular day’s headlines or front page are the result of that day’s editorial decisions. The continuities in presentation and style are the public articulation of the news conventions and priorities of that media organ.

This is the framework within which individual reporters must gather and present news, and compete for public attention and career advancement. News organizations which give a relative emphasis to violence in overall reportage, and which tend to adopt successful news violence formulas are likely to convey a sense of those priorities to their news staffs.

The Violent World Portrayed by the Media

For economic and other reasons, there are tendencies for the picture of the world presented by our news media to be distorted with a negative and violent bias. Newsmen might argue that despite violence or lack of it, the public has a right to know, and any suggestion that their reporting practices be changed smacks of censorship, totalitarianism and a denial of freedom of speech. This can be countered, however, with the argument that the right to know need not be equated with undue over-emphasis on any particular aspect. It can be questioned whether news media manpower and other resources should be as heavily allocated to coverage of violent news. Clearly, where media organizations are supported

by revenues gained through advertising and sales, social and cultural priorities may carry far less weight among media decision-makers than commercial factors. News organizations must in most cases succeed as a business, and the conventions of professional journalism must be broadly supportive of that mission. This can have far-reaching and undesirable consequences because the media form a crucial link in the flow of information within society, and they strongly influence the thinking of the public in setting any agenda of social concerns.

In entertainment as well, underlying the themes, settings, characters and plots, there is an implied system of values, which may or may not be socially desirable. Here again, the public often receives misinformation about the world around them. In a subtle and cumulative way, the pervasive element of violence in media content may inspire anxiety, frustration, fear, distrust, and violence itself in the society at large. But it is the commercial considerations, not social effects, which may dominate because media violence sells.

4. ARE CANADIAN SOCIETY AND CULTURAL IDENTITY BEING THREATENED BY MEDIA VIOLENCE IMPORTED FROM THE U.S. AND OTHER COUNTRIES?

One of the central concerns about media violence is that Canadians may be importing an epidemic of international violence through the media – especially from the United States. The concern is not peculiar to Canada. Mexico has taken steps to keep out U.S. television violence.¹¹¹

Canada and Ontario share a common border and language with the United States. Our past and present are different, and this is reflected in cultural and social differences between the two countries. But the concern is that our future may be the same, specifically that Canadian society may become excessively violent like the United States. Imported media violence may be one of the main mechanisms for spreading crime and violence into Canada.

The Media and Culture

Culture can be described as the social and intellectual environment which shapes people's thinking, lifestyles, values and behaviour. It gives people characteristics which distinguish them from members of another culture.

In North American society, the mass media are the major force in creating this environment. They convey information and entertainment which serve as an agent of socialization and they provide a common fund of knowledge and experience for the population at large. The advent of film, radio and television has brought about a dramatic change in the flow of information within society.¹¹² The relatively centralized nature of the film and broadcasting industry, which is dictated by economics, puts a greater distance between the people who provide the information and the public.¹¹³ The emphasis on different kinds of news, for instance, has shifted so that national or international events crowd out issues that are of importance at a local level. Similarly, the information transmitted through the media reflects the accepted behaviour and customs of the centre where it was produced.¹¹⁴ In North America, most of the media centres are in the United States. Canada is in many ways a hinterland for U.S. mass culture.

By virtue of the glamour, sophistication or seemingly authoritative status of the media, the importance of the values and experiences of people beyond the major media centres is downgraded. These people also have fewer opportunities to express and thereby reinforce their own regional differences,¹¹⁵ so these tend to weaken and fade over time.

Consequently, the manners, dress, social conventions, personal values and even language are adopted more and more from what is seen, heard or read in the media. This is a problem which looms large in the relationship between Canada and the United States, because of the tremendous influence of American media in this country.¹¹⁶

At stake here is more than a quaint turn of phrase. There is a set of attitudes, values and social behaviour patterns which make Canadian society and culture distinctly different from that of the U.S., and which help to make up our national identity. Although the two countries share many similarities,

there may be more value in emphasizing and preserving the subtle but important differences — differences which are potentially eroded by the steady flow of American media across the border.

Canada and the United States: Separate Traditions

There are a number of marked differences in the historical development and present social structure of the two countries which serve to illustrate their separate traditions. Perhaps the most obvious is the fact that Canada's transition from colony to nationhood was long, and largely peaceful. By contrast, the independence of the United States was born out of the American Revolution. Many studies have pointed to the enduring tradition of the revolutionary psychology in American society, manifested in individualistic and aggressive social styles.¹¹⁷

A second enduring contrast in the past of the two countries reflects the “opening up” of the two halves of the North American continent. The British sense for administrative order ensured that the law and government administration usually preceded the settlers in the opening up of the Canadian West, whereas settlers pushing back the American frontier established their own laws, often by force of arms. These strikingly different patterns in westward expansion have left many vestiges down to the present.

Generally speaking, Americans have inherited a tradition of greater aggressiveness, while Canadians look back on a more peaceful, cautious history. A contemporary comparison would indicate that this difference is still a significant one today.

Partly this is reflected in the political and social styles of the two countries which are the product of historical forces. Canadians are more individually conservative — but with a strong collectivist tradition of the left in our political parties, including a parliamentary socialist party.¹¹⁸ Americans put greater stock in “fundamental freedoms” which are the philosophical basis of individualism and aggressiveness. In addition, it is a tradition of the right rather than of the left which characterizes the American political spectrum.

U.S. - Canadian differences are also partly rooted in the differences in the world roles of the two countries. When international disputes arise, Canadian armed forces may be sent in as peace-keepers. American troops, however, more often take an active part in the dispute. The massive consequences in terms of both international and domestic violence were brought home to Americans with the Vietnam war experience. But for the United States it is not as simple as avoiding foreign entanglements. To ensure a defence capability for the preservation of the United States, it is continuously necessary to maintain a political consensus behind a massive technological capability for international aggression. This can hardly fail to have repercussions on American political and social styles.

The contemporary difference between the two cultures which is of most concern to Canadians is the contrast in social violence between the two countries. Since 1960 in the United States there has been a proliferation of violence, especially in urban settings.¹¹⁹ Correspondingly, there has been a striking increase in the proportions of media violence. It is not established that there is a direct connection, but Canada shares media violence with the United States, and is concerned that we may come to share in the real violence as well. Some of the indicators are frightening. In 1974, the United States had

20,600 murders¹²⁰ by comparison to Canada's 545 — almost 40 times the murders for 10 times the population.¹²¹ The United States is approaching an average of one firearm for every American,¹²² almost twice the rate in Canada — though Canada's average has been climbing quickly.¹²³

The American Media in Canadian Society

The challenge to Canada is that Canadian media diets are saturated with content of U.S. origin, and that much of that content may be violent and pre-empt Canadian alternatives. As stated earlier, it is reliably estimated that 80% of U.S. prime time television programs contain violent incidents. There has been no systematic content analysis of Canadian entertainment programs, but there is suggestive evidence that Canadian content is significantly less violent.¹²⁴ A comparison of Canadian and American television news in 1970 showed that 64% of the reports presented by CBS concerned violence, compared to 32% on the CBC.¹²⁵ Another example of this tendency in the U.S. television news is the local news format for one American network, which is sold to viewers (and advertisers) on the basis of action, excitement and, more often than not, violence. This includes news teams specializing in fires and other forms of violence.

The ability of imported media content to economically dominate various Canadian media — especially though not exclusively through violence formats — is a second key factor. This means that it is a constant struggle for Canadian media to produce Canadian cultural statements in competition with American media offerings to Canadian consumers.

Differences in societies and cultures are demonstrated in variations in content produced, but in Canada it may disappear because of the overwhelming dominance of the American media in the content consumed. How does this situation prevail?

Obviously, the common language and other similarities between the United States and English-speaking Canada, along with our geographic proximity, make this country a natural market for the powerful, well-established organizations which produce innumerable books, magazines, films, records and television programs in the United States.

Furthermore, Canadians have consistently demonstrated an eagerness to have access to American media by buying their books, seeing their films, subscribing to cable TV, or erecting higher antennas. Naturally, this competition makes the struggle for survival by English-Canadian media organizations an extremely difficult one. Film distributors and exhibitors, and radio and television broadcasters argue that they must program American material because it attracts much larger audiences than Canadian content and therefore generates higher revenues. This income is often their economic salvation. For example, CTV network recently reported¹²⁶ to the Canadian Radio-Television Commission that Canadian-made prime time productions in 1974 represented 42% of costs but only 23.3% of revenue. U.S. made prime time programming accounted for only 12.4% of costs but returned 49.3% of their revenue. It is economic considerations of these kinds in the North American commercial media system which lead to the American predominance in Canadian media consumption.

Successive Canadian governments have expressed serious concern over the negative impact of foreign media on the growth and development of a Canadian culture. They have been inspired by a belief that

there should be outlets for the expression of a Canadian culture and a Canadian "image of reality" to counteract the influence of American media. There are several special problems involved in the survival of the Canadian media which can provide such a service.

First, in comparison to the U.S., Canada offers a market one-tenth the size and therefore, less potential for revenue. In addition, the population is spread across an enormous geographical area in such a way as to present serious problems of distribution. A smaller population also means less available investment capital, and a smaller number of talented creative people. Added to that is the problem of satisfying the ambitions of Canadian artists in Canada with smaller budgets and fewer opportunities for them to develop their talents than the United States can provide.

Second, for the broadcasting industry, the proximity of most of the population to the American border presents more problems. People living in border cities have always been able to pick up radio and television signals from American stations, and now, with cable, those living hundreds of miles away also have access to them. This has the effect of fragmenting the audience and reducing the number of viewers that the Canadian broadcasters can deliver to their advertisers. Sales drop off and revenues decrease, leaving them even smaller budgets with which to face financially stronger American competitors.¹²⁷

American broadcasters have been quick to capitalize on the situation in the traditional border markets. With all the advantages of the larger American market, and often with the support of a large, successful network, television stations in Buffalo, Detroit and elsewhere have been able to entice Canadian advertising dollars over the border by offering lower rates, or they have sold the Canadian audience to their own advertisers as a spill-over bonus. Two American stations, KCND in Pembina, North Dakota (now relocated in Canada) and KVOS in Bellingham, Washington, were set up almost solely to draw business from advertisers in Winnipeg and Vancouver.¹²⁸

Government Measures to Foster Canadian Media Industries

Successive Canadian governments have taken steps to strengthen Canadian media industries in the face of American competition, especially in recent years.

The National Film Board and the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation were established in the 1930's. The CBC is partly financed from public funds and partly from advertising revenues.¹²⁹ It buys a number of American television shows, both to generate advertising earnings and to make its overall television schedule more attractive. Some of these shows contain violence¹³⁰ and many are shown in prime time. A recent federal initiative in the area of film is the establishment of the Canadian Film Development Corporation, which helps to finance both violent and non-violent film content.¹³¹

In Ontario, the Ontario Educational Communications Authority through its Toronto, Ottawa, London and Kitchener channels is an increasing audience success, with its instructional and educationally-oriented entertainment and public affairs content. Indeed, commercial broadcasters complain that this publicly financed television is eroding the economics of Canadian commercial broadcasting even further.¹³²

In addition to these government agencies, Canadian content regulations have been implemented in several media. The Canadian Radio-Television Commission has established Canadian content regula-

tions for television and radio to further the Canadian television production and recording industries. In 1965, Canadian advertisers were informed that they could no longer deduct the cost of advertising in American magazines for tax purposes, with the exception of the Canadian editions of Time and Reader's Digest, and the exemptions of these two magazines is now to be removed as well. The same statute will apply to border station advertising.¹³³ The two major movie theatre chains in Canada, Odeon and Famous Players (both foreign-owned), have agreed after negotiations with the Federal Government and the possibility of action by the Ontario Government, to increase the showing of Canadian films and to invest a proportion of their revenues in the Canadian film industry.

However, American productions still dominate the Canadian market in most media. Governmental measures have changed the economics of the competitive position of Canadian media — reversing somewhat the economic impact of the American media influx. They do not, however, necessarily counteract the content impact of American media in Canada.

Imported Media Violence

The violence in imported media content may be cause for concern on the many grounds previously identified in Chapters 1 and 2. The constant portrayal of fictional or sensationalized lives and events based on the experience of a more violent society may be undermining the values and standards of behaviour which may make for a more peaceful society. It may facilitate and increase crime and violence in society, or feed unhealthy responses such as fear, anxiety, tolerance, desensitization or victimization.

Life in large American cities is described in the news and portrayed in much entertainment as violent and dangerous. The attitudes to urban living which develop as a result may be applied by Canadians to their own cities as well, and their behaviour may alter accordingly. In this way, the fear of crime on the streets of New York may be transmuted completely without justification into fear of crime on the streets of Toronto, Windsor, Ottawa or London.

Thus, imported media violence may affect our society when it is directly or indirectly imitated on the street and when it encourages fear and anxiety about the safety of our environment. It may also increase our tolerance and expectation of violence in real life by providing us with a distorted view of the world. These potential effects could, of course, be attributed to media violence from any country, but it is the United States which supplies by far the largest amount of violent content as well as many of the most violent kinds of content to Canadians. In addition, its success here encourages the Canadian media to copy it, so that both Canadian audiences and the Canadian media industries may be under constant homogenizing pressures to become "Americanized" and more violence-oriented.

Even Canadian news media may promote the association of Canadian social violence with trends in American society through sensationalism or in simple suggestive comparisons. Recently, after a girl was stabbed to death in a Toronto subway station, news reports presented the matter as evidence that Toronto was becoming like Detroit. This was despite the fact that police described it as an unusual and isolated incident.

Another way Canadian media may come to reflect imported rather than Canadian styles and priorities is through imported news content. Because of budgetary restrictions, Canadian news organizations can afford only a limited number of foreign correspondents. Consequently, they must rely on wire services or the news gathering facilities of foreign media, usually those which are American-owned.¹³⁴ The men who report this news, of course, bring to their task the conventions, perceptions, and training of their own media organizations and society. This bias can often not be eliminated even by the best Canadian editors.

In this way, our factual view of the world from our own media may be coloured by reportage of American and international news selected and presented according to American styles. Because of the American media emphasis on violence, we may have cause for concern that our reliance on American networks and wire services may be distorting Canadians' perceptions of the world, international events, and American society itself.

One special area of increasing media violence is, ironically, the televised coverage of Canada's national sport. With the rapid expansion of professional hockey into the southern and western U.S. the general quality of play declined. At the same time, there was a notable increase in the amount of violence on the ice. In fact, the people who promote the game in its new locations have in several cases tried to sell it on the thrill of watching the fights that erupt rather than the excitement of seeing highly skilled athletes compete. As discussed earlier, this more violent style of play can filter down to the youngest Canadian amateur — primarily through the mechanisms of extensive media coverage.¹³⁵

In sum, then, the concern about imported media violence is that the entire range of values and behaviour which surround aggression in the media may be slowly and subtly displacing the more desirable social standards and attitudes to which Canadians aspire. We may be inundated with imported media violence in news, sports and entertainment that may be having negative social effects in terms of attitudes and behaviour. In addition, because of the economics of the media industries as presently organized, it may be simultaneously limiting indigenous Canadian capacity to produce competitive media alternatives — in terms of both content and media effects. These may indeed be posing serious threats to Canadian society and culture.

5. CAN ANYTHING BE DONE ABOUT MEDIA VIOLENCE? WHAT CAN ONTARIO DO?

Sometimes the suggestion is made that little can be done about media violence. In fact, there are many kinds of action which individuals, the media industries and governments could consider taking. The following are some examples of plausible policy options. Others will be proposed as the Commission's investigations proceed.

Action by Individuals

There are four kinds of action which media consumers could take:

1. They can turn off their radio, television sets and stereos, refuse to go to theatres, or refuse to purchase newspapers, magazines, and books which contain violent or offensive material. In the case of parents, they can closely supervise what their children are exposed to.
2. Individuals can organize for group action. This might take the form of letter-writing campaigns to the media and to advertisers, boycotts of certain categories of media content, boycotts of the products of advertisers who sponsor violent content, or public information and educational campaigns.
3. Individuals and groups may be in a position to take legal action against media organizations. They can lay complaints with local officials to allege offences under the Criminal Code. Media organizations can be sued for libel, slander or defamation of character.

In California, a woman is suing a major network, claiming her daughter was raped as a result of a specific program.

Media consumers might sue not only as individuals but as members of a larger group. Such "class action" lawsuits — where a small group sues on behalf of a larger group — are common in the United States in connection with defective products and pollution.

4. Individuals and groups can make complaints and appeals to their Members of Parliament and of the provincial legislatures, to regulatory bodies such as the CRTC and the Board of Film Censors.

Action by individuals and citizen groups faces a number of obstacles. Media content choices are often carefully structured by media industries with a view to maximizing revenues and profits.¹³⁶ If pro-social programming is not available for children or adults at a particular time, the choice may be a difficult one: attractive but unsuitable programming or nothing at all.

In trying to make intelligent choices, individual consumers often lack information about media content and its effects. For example, detailed information about pro-social vs. violence content and effects in various media is not available as a guide to selection for children and adults.

Organized group action may face the difficulties of lack of funds and lack of access to the media. In the case of media access, groups face the problem that the media organizations they seek to criticize control access to persuading others.

Indeed, a general problem facing individual action is that the media are highly organized, whereas the media consumers are highly disorganized.

Action by the Media Industries

Some of the policy options which could be implemented by the media industries themselves are as follows:

1. A content classification system, similar to that already in use for films, could be developed and applied for other media. This might apply particularly to television programming, theatres, magazines and books, and perhaps recorded music. In implementing such a classification system, care would have to be taken that the restricted categories did not have the perverse effect of promoting undesirable content as more interesting or exciting.

As noted, such classification systems are in effect for films. In the United States, they are operated by the Motion Picture Association of America. In Ontario, they are under the jurisdiction of the Board of Film Censors which is part of the Ministry of Consumer and Commercial Relations.

2. Media offerings could be preceded by warnings that certain content may be undesirable for certain audiences. Such warnings are occasionally used in television presentations and some printed material, primarily to draw consumers' attention to aspects they may find offensive.
3. The various media industries could develop and implement content and program codes based on social effects. Present industry codes¹³⁷ are suggestive of the form these might take although they have not generally been drawn up according to a systematic investigation of potential social effects.

Such codes could lead to self-imposed violence quotas, refusal of television stations and film distributors to buy undesirable material, and efforts to provide suitable content for children.

4. The media industries could also organize industry review bodies to promote or police desirable content standards in particular media industries. Such review bodies would be based on voluntary participation and compliance. Experience to date has been primarily in connection with press councils and some motion picture bodies.¹³⁸ These are generally thought to have had limited success.
5. The problems inherent in current news definition and selection were identified above. This points to the possibility of the news industries reformulating their conventions and directives regarding the selection and presentation of news. The actual importance of current information to the constituencies served by the media as opposed to its emotional or sensational elements is an example of an alternative news principle. A corollary might be an emphasis on providing information on the basis of which media consumers can take individual or collective action. This would be in contrast with "news" on the basis of which people cannot act, but only react.
6. The media industries could promote an overall re-orientation of incentives and personnel with a view to emphasizing pro-social media effects and content.

Industry policy initiatives of this kind confront three kinds of obstacles. Perhaps the most important barriers to change are economic. Most of these possible actions would work to the economic disadvantage of commercial media industries. Even if applied uniformly across an industry, they could wreak more economic hardship on some than on others.

Second, all organizations tend to resist change which does not seem to benefit them. The media industries seem by and large to feel that the rationale for their operations and behaviour at present is generally sound. They do not welcome outsiders telling them how they should rearrange their affairs. Even industry review bodies may not offer much promise if dramatic rather than minor change should be desired. Experience with industry bodies suggests that they work best where there are specific advantages, such as control of the market, to the industries in question.

Action by Governments

There is also a broad range of measures which federal and provincial governments could consider adopting with respect to media violence. The following is a preliminary list:

1. Governments could attempt more vigorous enforcement of existing law. There are now a number of Criminal Code, and customs and post office provisions dealing with obscene violence in printed material and films, hate literature and crime comics.¹³⁹ The Attorney General of Ontario has recently invoked the provisions of the Criminal Code to discourage excessive violence in hockey.
2. Film and other censorship is also already in existence.¹⁴⁰ Governments could consider content quotas in films, television, and other media so as to limit violence; government imposed and enforced classification by degree of violence; and deletion of programs or channels from cable availability. In the case of non-broadcast media there could be special provisions against the distribution and sale of media content objectionable on grounds of violence.
3. Because media violence often originates outside Canada, border controls could be a device to limit the importation of violent media content into Canada. Existing customs provisions are already in force to deal with material deemed obscene for reasons of sex and violence. Mexico screens the importation of violent television programs from the U.S. and routinely rejects a number of “popular” series.

A related possibility could be the imposition of tariffs on imported film and television content. As discussed above, imported crime drama is often available at much lower cost than Canadian content produced in Canada. At an appropriate level, the tariff could make Canadian content more economically attractive, especially to broadcast television.

4. Governments could support private individual and group action through government sponsored content analysis, media violence monitoring, public education about the nature and effects of media violence, and financial support for private groups seeking change in media content.
5. Provincial legislatures could introduce statutes to make media organizations liable to legal action for damages caused by media content. Specific authorization could be given for “class action” lawsuits. Alternatively, governments could confer statutory recognition on citizen-based media accountability bodies on a local or regional basis.

6. Licensing of media organizations by a responsible authority is already in place for broadcasting in Canada through the Canadian Radio-Television Commission.¹⁴¹ The requirement that a license be obtained and maintained as a condition of continuing in a particular media business can enable an independent board to supervise the social accountability of media organs within its jurisdiction. The licensing approach is hypothetically applicable to media industries other than broadcasting.
7. Governments could establish one or more media ombudsmen to entertain, investigate and report on complaints about media violence.
8. Governments could take steps to alter the financial environment in which the media industries operate. Through subsidized broadcasting, both the Federal and Ontario Governments are already active in this way. All levels of government are involved in providing on a selective basis for other media in the performing arts areas.

Because of the economic importance of media violence, governments could consider ways of providing the media industries with access to a revenue base other than the sale of advertising. Several European countries offer models to be examined, such as annual television licenses or subscriptions.¹⁴² Another possibility would be the imposition of a tax on entertainment violence in the media. Such a tax could be applied to media industries' revenues or to advertisers with a view to discouraging violence.

If such a tax did **not** discourage the amount of media violence, substantial revenues would at least be generated for other purposes, such as assistance to victims of real violence.

Governments confront three main obstacles in the area of media control policy. One is economic, for major government action would drastically alter the economic viability of many media organizations and several industries, unless alternative financing arrangements were provided.

A second main problem which governments confront relates to freedom of expression and of the press. In its contemporary form, freedom of the press amounts to a claimed license on the part of media industries to be free to decide content without outside interference, and to be free from accountability to society over behavioural freedoms for the media industries.

Third, governments are themselves accountable to the wishes of the people. Governments must confront the arguments advanced by the media industries that violence is what people want. There is evidence that the argument must not be taken at face value. People may "like" media violence to a large extent because they are taught to. Media industries attempts to structure people's choice plays a role. If people were fully aware of the nature and effects of media violence — they are not fully aware now — they might behave very differently. Until there is a really substantial alternative in terms of an emphasis on non-violence in media content, it is actually difficult to know what people really like. Governments would presumably want fuller answers to all these questions before making a final determination.

Federal or Provincial Action?

It is a common misconception that, under the Canadian constitution, the regulation of media violence is exclusively a federal matter. In fact, some media and media activities are regulated at the federal

level, while others are regulated at the provincial level. Some aspects of media violence can be dealt with at either or both governmental levels.

At the present time, broadcast radio, broadcast television, and cable television are primarily regulated at the federal level. The Canadian Radio-Television Commission determines which organizations can broadcast or disseminate programming, and under what terms and conditions.

However, the provinces, and especially Ontario, play an important role in broadcasting. National communications policy is shaped on a federal-provincial basis to a significant extent. Ontario plays a substantial role in television in the province through the Ontario Educational Communications Authority and TV Ontario. All provinces have indicated an interest in provincial regulation of some future aspects of cable. Some forms of pay television could be more logically regulated at the provincial rather than the federal level.

There are not now licensing bodies for the non-broadcast media similar to the Canadian Radio-Television Commission. However, if such licensing mechanisms were established for other media such as newspapers, magazines, films and theatres, these would likely be established at the provincial rather than the federal level for reasons of constitutional jurisdiction. Rights to sue media organizations for damages caused by content would likely be a matter of provincial jurisdiction.

In many areas relating to media violence, there are opportunities for both the federal and provincial powers to legislate or to act.

For example, both levels are now involved in de facto censorship of some forms of media content considered extreme. The Federal Government regulates obscene material and crime comics under one or more of the Criminal Code, the Post Office Act and the Customs Act. Censorship of movies as well as some aspects of law enforcement are under provincial control.

Second, complementary federal and provincial provisions regarding misleading advertising reflect joint federal-provincial interest and jurisdiction with respect to this kind of communications content.

Third, either or both levels of government could undertake public information and education programs, and both do now provide financial support to the media industries. The Government of Canada owns and subsidizes the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. The Government of Ontario owns and operates TV Ontario. Both levels of government give assistance to film makers, and cultural and theatre groups. Both have been involved in assisting Canadian publishers of books and magazines.

Similarly, both levels of government could be involved in efforts to restructure the financial framework within which the Canadian media industries operate. Canadian content regulations are applied to broadcasting at the federal level in an attempt to channel funds to Canadian productions. The adoption of voluntary Canadian content quota in movie theatre showings, prompted by government action, seeks a similar result for films. Changes in taxation, government subsidization, or institution of alternative forms of revenue (such as subscriptions in place of advertising) could or would take place as a result of action at both levels.

But perhaps the most important aspect of the divided jurisdiction with respect to the media and media violence in Canada is whether action should more appropriately take place at the national, regional or local level in respect to different issues related to media violence. In recent years the problems of overlapping federal and provincial interest and constitutional jurisdiction in major policy areas has been resolved into co-ordinating machinery to reflect both national and regional interests. It would appear that machinery is already in place for co-operative and co-ordinated policy efforts at both levels with respect to media violence.

CONCLUSIONS

If that is the “state of the art” in our understanding of the nature and impact of violence in the communications media, what particular contribution can the Royal Commission on Violence in the Communications Industry make? The answer is that there are nine major respects in which the Royal Commission will be different from all others which have gone before.

1. The Royal Commission is investigating the implications of violence in all media. While researchers recognize that the communications media have combined rather than individual effects, previous major studies have concentrated on only one medium at a time, such as television, comic books or film.
2. The Royal Commission’s research will include an examination of both news and entertainment violence. Although the implications of the exploitation of violence in the news media are increasingly recognized, leading studies outside Canada have concentrated almost exclusively on entertainment violence.
3. The Royal Commission has a more comprehensive definition of media violence than any previous studies. The Commission’s definition includes a broader range of physical violence than many other studies. In addition, the Royal Commission will be investigating psychological violence and social violence, which other studies have generally ignored.
4. The Royal Commission on Violence in the Communications Industry is the first major Canadian study of media violence. Even though media violence may be a central threat to Canadian society and cultural identity, there has been no major study of this issue in Canada.
5. The Royal Commission’s research program will undertake more sophisticated “content analysis” than has been done before. The Commission will be researching and analyzing the quality of media violence and the different kinds of value systems in which it is presented. This has not been done before on a comprehensive basis. In addition, the Commission will be identifying not only what kinds of violence and other content are available, but what people are actually consuming. It is the content of the media diet of violence and not merely its availability which is important.
6. The Royal Commission will be investigating a much more complete list of possible effects of media violence and other content. As noted in Chapter 2, previous research has focused on too narrow a range of effects, primarily imitative behaviour. The Royal Commission hopes to gather data on media effects on the climate of violence, causal connections with specific violence, social perceptions of media violence and desensitization and conditioning as a result of media violence.
7. The Royal Commission’s research will attempt to get behind the imperatives within the media industry, including the economic aspects, and media industry behaviour patterns, which lead to the emphasis on violent presentations. This has never been systematically done in combination with studies of content and effects.

8. The Royal Commission's research program will investigate the pro-social possibilities of the media as the relevant standard of comparison with the anti-social effects of media violence. Most previous studies have ignored the fact that it is impossible to know how bad media violence may be, without a clear specification of how good media content can be.
9. Finally, the Royal Commission will be investigating the full range of policy approaches which can be taken to media violence. The Commission's terms of reference direct it to propose appropriate action not only for the federal and provincial governments, but for the media industries and the public at large. There has been no previous systematic investigation of alternative approaches to media violence.

If the Royal Commission can succeed in meeting these research objectives, it will have made a significant contribution to the understanding of media content, media influence and media violence in Canadian society.



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FOOTNOTES

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